



# ELSAH HISTORY

Number 28

ELSAH HISTORY

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## ANOTHER SIDE to NOTCHCLIFF & ELIESTOWN

Elsah History, numbers 25 and 26 features an extensive account of life at Notchcliff and Eliestown. There was another side to the life of a large country estate, though, and in excerpts from two interviews with Annetta Cronin, of Elsie, we get a glimpse of that side. Mrs. Cronin was born in a log house in the Beltrees area, a younger member of the Bechtold family. As a young teenager, she went to work for Mrs. Katherine Allen Cresswell in Elsie. At that time Mrs. Cresswell ran the Riverview House as a boarding-house. The Notchcliff mansion burned in 1911, while Nettie was working in Elsie, and Mrs. Ames, who continued to summer in Elsie, moved into the "Eastover" farmhouse, which was located on the site of the present Principia College chapel.

Young Nettie Bechtold soon moved onto the Notchcliff estate grounds, keeping house for her brother in a farmhouse on the Elsie side of the estate grounds, in the area of the Principia College campus now known as Piassa Point. Here she became acquainted with Mrs. Ames, and later, when she married John Cronin, the couple rented the Notchcliff gatehouse, on the river end of the village. In interviews with Paul Williams, Mrs. Cronin recalled some features of life at the environs of Notchcliff: /

P.W.: You must have been still a girl when the big Notchcliff house burned down.

A.C.: Yes, I was. I was working down here at Mrs. Cresswell's boarding house, and I started to work for her when I was twelve.

P.W.: Did you ever work for Mrs. Ames?

A.C.: I stayed with my brother up there and kept house, and we lived down below where the mansion used to be. That house was torn down by Mr. Ferris, and moved up where the



Annetta Cronin with the hollow of Elsie as a background

Lewitzes are.<sup>1</sup> That's where my brother and I used to live and my brother farmed that land of Mrs. Ames's. He raised cattle, and Mrs. Ames used to come down an awful lot and look at the calves. I made her butter and carried her milk to her every night. But that's the only contact I had with her then. Well, I used to go up to her house, and we'd set on the porch and talk. She was very nice.

She used to come down here when I lived down here. I saw more of her when I rented her little rock house down here. She used to go get away from up there, and tell Mr. Porter to take her, tell Annie Horn, her housekeeper, that she'd gone into town, and she'd send Mr. Porter into town, and she'd get out down here, and I'd fry chicken for her 'cause she didn't like chicken fried in butter, and that's the only way they'd

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fix it for her. She used to stay there all afternoon.<sup>2</sup> She was a little woman--pretty little blue eyes, and had every tooth in her head.

She's the one I got the money from to buy my place up there, up there where Bob lives.<sup>3</sup> You know I lived in her little rock house and paid her \$60 a year for that house. And one time she wanted to sell it to me, too.

She says, "If you like this so well, why don't you take two acres here." She says, "I'll let you have it for \$2,000."

But I didn't want to live by the river because they didn't have the dam then, and the water went clean up right to the kitchen door down there. So I told her, "No, if I wanted to buy, I'd like to buy at the upper end of town. Besterfelds owned that place at that time, and Mrs. Besterfeld just passed away, and right away the place was up for sale. So we had \$600 saved up, but it wasn't \$1,000 cash.

So one day Mrs. Ames was down there, and I says, "You don't want to loan some money, do you?"

And she says, "Who to?"

And I says, "Me. My husband and I would like to get the Besterfeld place."

"Oh, well," then she says, "I'd lose my renter."

And I says, "Yes, you sure would."

And she says, "Oh, yes, but I want you to have a home. I'll have Mr. Ostermiller come up here, [That's her banker] and we'll make it out for as long as you want it." I took it for four years, but I paid her back in three. But that's how I got the home up there. At that time it wasn't nothing but just a three room kind of house, but we rebuilt it all, and Bob's still rebuilding on it.

P.W.: Didn't you tell me once that Mrs. Ames used to have her money washed?

A.C.: Yeah, she washed all of her money and dried it. Had a little table with a slab top and had all of her bills washed and laid in rows across that little table. She washed all of her money.

P.W.: Did she come up to Elsay mostly in the summer?

A.C.: Well, she was here quite a lot. She stayed here just as long as she possibly could stay.

P.W.: Then she went to St. Louis?

A.C.: I don't even remember where she went to, but I know Johnny, my brother John, used to have to send what he took in in wheat money to the St. Louis bank to Mr. Ostermiller. Everything was done through her banker.

P.W.: Where did Mr. Porter live?

A.C.: He lived in a little weather board bungalow that Mrs. Ames built brand new for him. It was right about where the college library is. John, my brother, put in the land right around his house and all around, and then over there where the baseball or football field is there was four or five patches of land over there that he farmed, and put in corn and stuff over in there. But that's growing up in weeds, and there won't be anything left of the land if you don't keep it cleared off a little better.

P.W.: You said they had cattle up there too?

A.C.: My brother did, yeah. Horses and cattle. Farmed everything with a horse then. You didn't have no tractors. Mrs. Ames used to raise a lot of turkeys. Had lots of turkeys around there. The road was always running full of turkeys. Red ones. They were like wild guineas. Just went anywhere. Now where the Notchcliff apartments are and along there, there were buggy sheds. Mrs. Ames had only two surrey horses when we came up there, and Croxfords bought them, and kept them until they were near thirty years old.

P.W.: Where did Mrs. Ames get her water?

A.C.: She had running water. They pumped that from way down at the river.

P.W.: How did you get water then?

A.C.: We had a cistern, right in front of the house. And it had a big rock patio like, where there was a pump on it. Just a hand pump.

P.W.: Did you ever run out of water?

A.C.: Oh, yeah. We ran out of water lots of times. We had to haul water with a team and wagon. Went down to Elsay to get it at the spring. The cattle went down to the branch down there. It was just the water for the house that would run out.<sup>4</sup> When you have a lot of milk utensils, it takes a lot of water. It's half



a day washing them, the utensils. The milk shed was built right onto the house. We had three rooms downstairs, plus the milk department where they separated milk. Then there were two rooms upstairs.

P.W.: What did you do with the milk?

A.C.: We shipped cream. The hogs always got the milk. That would have been a mess to deliver milk. Nobody would ever deliver milk. Now they've got milk trucks. You have to have a tank with pans going continuously, because you can't leave milk standing still and have it the next day. It'll sour. You've got to keep it moving. We used to separate the cream and the milk with a separator which you turned by hand.

P.W.: Did the cows provide a lot of money?

A.C.: Oh, yes. Cream's high. It all went to St. Louis. There is good money in cream if you've got a good cow. That milk is pretty weak. But we had all Jersey cows. At that time you paid eighty-one or eighty-six dollars apiece for cows, and that was pretty high for cows. And they were young yet.

When the boats used to land here, Pop used to drive fourteen or fifteen head of steers down there. We'd all ride horseback and run down there to what they used to call the bull pen. They had a pen down there. Then, when the boats landed, they put them on a boat, and at that time they only had about fifty dollars a head for a big fat one. Now they get \$260. But you could get weenies at ten cents a pound, too. Lots of weenies for ten cents, good ones--better than you get them now. Bologna was a big long piece for seventy-five cents. You don't get that now.

We'd ride any horse we could get. We'd go after the cows with them. Boy, you want some rough riding, you go down through the hollows after a gang of cows.

P.S. Did you use saddles or go bareback?

A.C.: Bareback. If it got too rough, you held to the mane.

P.W.: Did you go on many buggy rides?

A.C.: No. I didn't have time for that. I had to milk cows and take care of pigs and things like that, while my brother farmed. He'd come in so late that I didn't have time for anything but to get the housework done and the milk separated and the butter made. We had something to do them days.

P.W.: Did you make any of your own clothes?

A.C.: I made mine. Made all my kids, too. Couldn't afford anything else. Money didn't come easy like it does now.

P.W.: Where would you get the cloth?

A.C.: Why you'd only pay ten cents a yard for it! Down at Snyder's in Alton.

P.W.: That store's been there a long time, hasn't it.

A.C.: Ten cents a yard. Kellers used to handle dry goods, too. He had a big dry goods store. Went in there and got the first dress I ever made. It had little anchors and ropes on it. Ten cents a yard for calico.

P.S.: Did you go to Alton very much?

A.C.: No, you had to drive in the spring wagon if you went.

P.W.: How long would it take you to drive into Alton by the back road?

A.C.: About two hours, unless you went awful fast.

P.W.: Did Mrs. Ames have gas or electricity in her house here?

A.C.: No. No gas. No electricity. They had carbon lights. Even on her great big car they had these lamps with long points. The big Cadillac had carbon lights on it and a great big stick brake.

P.W.: Things have really changed around Notchcliff, haven't they. Are the roads the same?

A.C.: Well, Mrs. Ames had the roads put in to spell out her initials, L.V.S.A., beginning down at Elsay.

P.W. Isn't that something!

A.C.: You didn't know that?

P.W.: No.

A.C.: Well, I did. She told me. And there used to be a big baseball field she gave us, and everybody came on Sundays to play baseball. Buggies lined up all the way. There was a tree and then a post to tie the horse, and then a tree and another post to tie a horse up. Just as you come in the gate to the college. All along that lane of trees.

P.W.: Did Mrs. Ames cut her ice from her ponds?

A.C.: Well, they got most of their ice off the river. The pond water was kind of muddy. Very seldom you'd see ponds clear. Our folks always cut ice for her and cut ice for Kellers. They'd saw the ice and take half the horses, put sharp shoes on them, and drive the horses out and cut ice. That was when you had the square ice boxes, and you'd lay out a hunk of ice in the square boxes and set all your food out on top of it. That kept the food, and the ice would last about three days, and then the old ice wagon would come, with a flock of kids behind it wanting all the chips.

P.W.: Right out of the river, huh?

A.C.: Right out of the river. You know where Mrs. Trovillion lives? That was an ice house down there. The two basements she's got. And they filled that full. That was Keller's ice house. And then where that building's caved in<sup>5</sup> that was another ice house down there. When my brothers were right young kids yet, that was their big winter money, ice-making. Everybody made ice.

P.W.: Did Mrs. Ames have an ice house.

A.C.: Yes, a little red building.

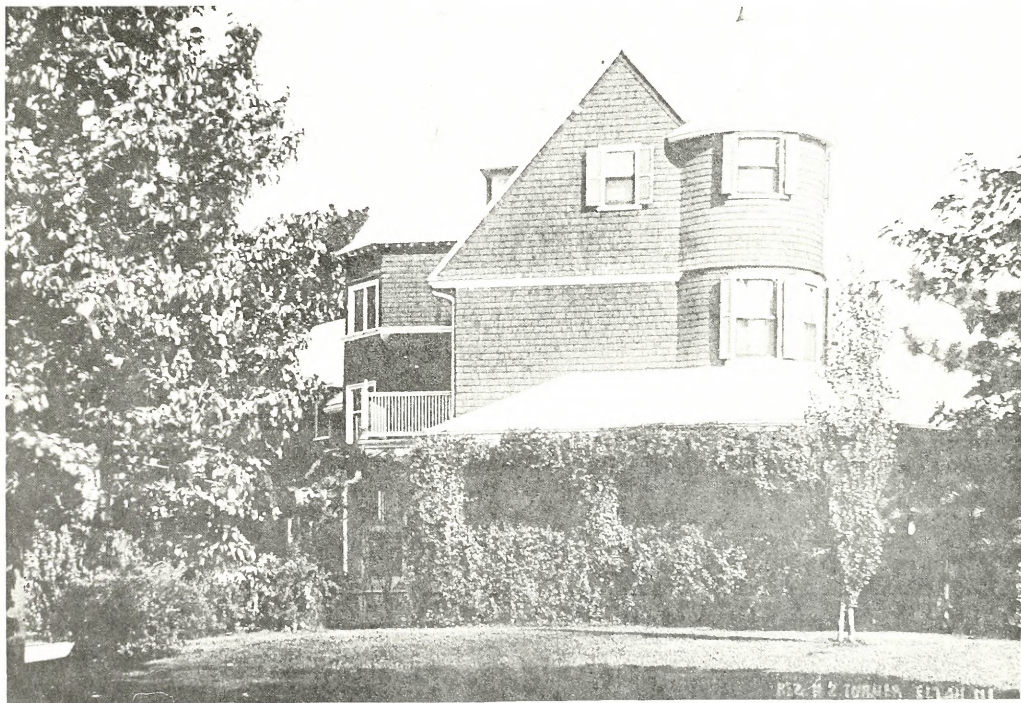
P.W.: Do you remember where the kitchen was in the Notchcliff estate?

A.C.: No, I don't because I only went in it about three times. They were kind of secret up there. Nobody went visiting very much. But I visited her lots up in the other house. Every night I'd be up there, and we would take a walk around and look at the flowers. And then she'd come down to my little house back there after I got married. I did go up to Eliestoun. I was more acquainted with that than any place because I worked there. The old Eliestoun house is pretty much like it was excepting a few changes since the Turners lived there, and the Blythes.

P.W.: At Eliestoun did they have any buildings over toward the dairy barn?

A.C.: No, excepting the buildings that were down that way for his cattle. He kept registered cattle, and they were all in board fences, and then in little barns down that way. Do they still have that great big garden over that way?

P.W.: Garden? No.



Eliestoun from the west in the Turner years.

A.C.: They did have one. They had rose trellises. On each side of that garden there were little wild roses, and they went all over the trellises. You go off down the road, and not where the patent gates were. You know what a patent gate is? That's a gate with a stick on it. When you stop with a surrey and horses, you just pull the stick, and it goes open. The posts are still there, but I don't know if the gate is. That's where the pond was where all the cat-tails and high cane is. They used to have some beautiful goldfish in there. And when you went around that there was this arch with all these roses around. You could go into the garden from the road. Then you could go all through it and come out on the other side with an arch. It was really pretty.

P.W.: I'll bet. That is just lawn now.

A.C.: Is it? Well, I haven't been over there since Miss Kelly<sup>6</sup> took me over there to watch the deer come out in the evening and on that lawn, and, boy, one of those silly little heads jumped right over in front of her car.

P.W.: Your brother, Henry, told me that he lived in that little "office" building out at Eliestown for a little while.

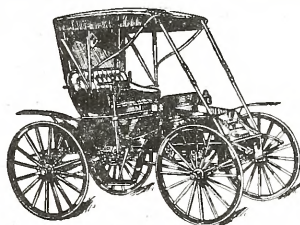
A.C.: Well, he used to garden up there. That's where he had the garden--right behind that and the wine cellar. He and Frank Nolan and another fellow used to room up in the barn. They had a big room up there right above the buggies. And that's where they lived. But that barn is burnt down now.

P.W.: Yeah. Let's see, that burnt around 1969.

A.C.: My brother, John, was a coachman up there. He used to drive the wagons. He and Frank Nolan were the two coachmen, and my brother, Henry, was the gardener. And my brother, Frank, worked for them later on. They were all on that land--all but my oldest brother. And he farmed different land. Frank Nolan and my brother John had to stay there all the time because the buggy horses were in that barn.

When they drove, they had to set up in front. They couldn't even talk to the people who were behind. Turners had wagons. What they called the station wagon, that had benches so you'd sit with your knees towards each other. That would hold maybe six. But then when Mr. Turner come up they had these great big ones, and they set in a round thing. But the coachmen just stayed up in the front, there. You didn't look back and you didn't gossip either. You just sat up straight. They had some beautiful wagons.

P.W.: Did the coachmen have to dress up, too?



A.C.: Oh, yes. When they took the Turners out, they had to look their best.

P.W.: Do you remember anything about Mr. Turner?

A.C.: He was a fat man, and we used to go up there, and I used to help Alice Conroy on Sundays with the cooking. I was only about twelve, but then I would carry dishes and things of that kind, and Mr. Turner used to come and talk to us every once in awhile. He was a good old fellow. The whole row of trees that was along the road out to Elsay Hills he had put in, and he was out there every day dressed in white to watch them put the trees in.<sup>7</sup> That's what they used to call Stumpy Ridge. My brother, Henry, had most of his land in, and he was living where Wanamaker lived.<sup>8</sup> He was one of the foremen for Turner and stayed there until Mr. Turner died.

P.W.: The Turners had sheep, didn't they?

A.C.: Oh, yes. The pastures were just like a lawn. The ponds--we used to go up there and fish and get frogs, and the ponds were clean and slick where the sheep would keep eating. Last time I was up there it didn't even look like the same place.

P.W.: It's pretty overgrown now.

A.C.: Yeah, looks to me like where the ponds were the woods moved in pretty close. But they were some beautiful ponds. He used to keep sheep first awhile in that pasture, then he'd move them awhile into this pasture, and that way they kept everything eaten off, and the other place would get a start again.

P.W.: Well, thank you very much, Nettie. This has been a real glimpse into something that has just disappeared from the Elsay scene.

A.C.: Well, that's all right. I'm glad to help.

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Mr. and Mrs. Ed Lewitz live on an extension of Penn Street, south of Mill Street, on a high hill above the village. Their house has been much modified, but the core of it apparently contains the material from the tenant farmhouse at Notchcliff.

<sup>2</sup>Since the Cronins were married in 1920, these visits would have taken place in the last years of Mrs. Ames's life. Her dates are 1837-1925.

<sup>3</sup>The Robert and June Cronin family, who live in the former Besterfeld house at the upper end of Mill Street.

<sup>4</sup>The cattle were run in part on the Elsay side of the estate, in what is now woodland. Photographs from the period show the area much more open, as the cattle kept down undergrowth. One still finds stray barbed wire fencing in the woods there.

<sup>5</sup>This ruin stands on Mill at the end of Elm Street.

<sup>6</sup>Annabel Kelly directed the food service at Principia College for some years at the time that Mrs. Cronin was a cook there.

<sup>7</sup>Mrs. Cronin's brother, Joseph Bechtold, helped put in the rows of sugar maples which now line the lane from Elsay Hills to the Eliestoun estate. He also hauled many loads of gravel from the bed of Mill Creek, in Beltrees, for that road. That accounts for the

many geodes in the road. Unlike Mrs. Ames, who generally took the boat to Elsay when coming to her estate, the Turners and Blythes later drove automobiles. Their route took them from Alton to the far end of Beltrees Road and then along Beltrees Road to what is now the west end of Elsay Hills. Thus the lovely lane of maples, now secluded, was the front entrance to Eliestoun at one time. The far end of Beltrees Road was often extremely muddy, and Mr. John Heitzman recalls that many years ago his father was requested on a number of occasions to pull the automobile out of the mud with his mules.

<sup>8</sup>John Wanamaker, Professor of Biology at Principia College, now retired, for some years lived in the small house in the hollow east of Stumpy Ridge. This is now the home of Mr. and Mrs. Richmond Haslam. In earlier years the St. Peters family also occupied the house.

## STUDENT RESTORATION PROJECT

Historians and old timers would call it an out building, but you and I know it as a shed. This spring, as part of a history course at Principia College, I had a chance to restore one of Elsay's out buildings. The building is located in the Belote's back yard and is visible from La Salle street between the Elsay Landing and the Belote house.

The building itself was made around the turn of the century and has retained its original appearance with little modification since its construction. It stands about fourteen feet high, twelve feet long and is ten feet wide. Elsay is fortunate to have such a fine specimen still standing. Most sheds fall into disuse after a brief 50 year life; many are torn down for the lumber, some catch fire, others blow down or rot away. This shed has an interesting history. Its first use was possibly for storage or as a wash house. Later it was used as a coal bin, where the coal was loaded into the building through a small window in the alley. We are certain that the building housed chickens at one point in time. However, the current predominant odor is more like a grandmother's attic than of chickens. At the present time the Belote shed is used for storage of garden tools and related items.

The Belote out building was an important shed to restore because of its well proportioned shape and its detailed construction. The original occupants of the Belote-Simpson house must have enjoyed the view of their back yard because the two sides of the shed visible from the house have decorative clapboard siding. The eaves of the building were carefully trimmed and boxed in,

much like those on a house. Most sheds are not built with the same careful attention to detail. Barn boards cover the sides of the building which are not visible from the house. These boards vary in size from eight to sixteen inches in width. Rusty square nails still hold these large boards to the side of the building. Full dimension lumber was used throughout the structure. In other words, these two by fours are really



The Belote shed after restoration

two inches by four inches, in comparison with today's smaller lumber. Most of this lumber was white pine, which is a wood that is not attractive to termites. The extensive use of this wood is a major reason why the shed had not been badly eaten by termites.

When I first saw the building in early spring I found that it was in poor shape. Many of the structural members had rotted away and needed replacing. The building also had a serious lean towards the Elsay Landing parking lot. Fortunately the structure partially rested on a concrete slab, which came in handy later in the restoration process. A cinder block wall was built up from the concrete, to provide support for the structure. Eventually the building would rest on this new foundation. After using a series of house jacks, the building was pushed into a straightened position and onto the new foundation.

Restoration doesn't have to be an expensive process. Many of the materials I used were either recycled or used. I was able to find some used lumber which sold for half the price of new lumber. There are many things that you can do for a building that are free or inexpensive, and may save the building from

further deterioration. Some of them are: make sure that the building is not covered with vines, remove all rubbish near the walls that could hold water, to keep the building dry, and check to see that the roof is water tight. If the wood is still deteriorating treat it with a wood preservative and keep the outside wood painted. An excellent alternative to paint is exterior stain. The good brands have linseed oil in them. This is a substance which gives wood younger qualities and helps it become water resistant. If you are nailing on parts of your building exposed to weather, use galvanized nails. They will last much longer. All of these restoration hints are relatively cheap and will do a lot for your building.

Building restoration is a skill that anyone can acquire. When I started I knew little about re-building walls and roofs but with a little neighborly advice I was able to make out just fine. If you are thinking of doing your own restoration remember -- restoration always takes twice as long as you think.

Colin M. Haynes

Review of Koster: Americans in Search of Their Prehistoric Past, by Stuart Struever and Felicia A. Holton. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979.

Perhaps no one has lavished the attention, intelligence, and persistence on the study of the lower Illinois River Valley that archeologist Stuart Struever has. His recent major project at the Koster farm, near Eldred, Illinois, about thirty-five miles from Elsay, has been national news for some time. And for some time scholarly reports of the findings of the archeologists have appeared, the work of a variety of archeologist writers.

It fits the pattern of this project, though, that a popular book should also appear, and even that it should be a Book-of-the-Month Club Alternate Selection. Because he has worked so hard to include the public in his project, and asked their support, it was inevitable that Stuart Struever should stand behind the writing of this story. Struever is a team organizer, though, and just as he cooperated with a number of others in the administration of the large and complex Koster dig, so his book is co-authored by Felicia A. Holton, a free-lance journalist and former Wall Street Journal reporter.

This gives the book a composite feel. It is clearly Struever's story, and generally his tone of voice is heard in the text, but the attitudes of journalism and efficient production which streamline the telling of the story also tend to make it stylistically bland.

Koster is as much autobiography as it is archeology, and it is more local history than either. Reading it one finds a blend of much about Struever's own life, with noticeable gaps; the life of Kampsville and a number of the people of the Lower Illinois area; the story of the dig and some of its principal scholars and workers; and much basic information about archeology--its aims, methods, discoveries, and speculations.

The tone is kept fairly light, even in the more serious archeological sections of the book. Nonetheless, Struever does use the text as another means of explaining his attitudes toward archeology. He is one of the "new" archeologists, who take the attitude that they are not unearthing artifacts, or even culture traits, but human behavior. This has led these archeologists to seek information about prehistoric climates, food sources, living methods, and human problems--to explore their subject as an early chapter in the continuing human problem of successfully interacting with environment.

Literally and figuratively, Struever has been one of the movers and shakers of the new archeology. While he has contributed several investigative methods to the study of the prehistoric past, it may well be that his most innovative contribution has resulted from his organizational and promotional ability. He has taken Midwest archeology out of small-group field school activity and enlarged every aspect of his operations. The story of Koster is one of the coordinated work of a number of archeologists and students, the establishment of a

permanent field headquarters in Kampsville, staffed by professionals all year around (though dependent on Northwestern University in Evanston), the amassing of vast amounts of data and processing of it immediately, and the participation of the public in the whole project.

Struever himself has turned from digging to fund-raising, traveling widely and continually in search of support for the project. In fact, one of the more extraordinary aspects of *Koster* is its testimony to his dogged intensity in building the Kampsville complex and pursuing the Koster dig, through two major floods (not mentioned in the book), dirt slides, financial problems, and Illinois summer heat. Naturally there has been a personal cost, but this too is not part of the book.

Surely *Koster* is the most lively book about rural Illinois in our area in a long time. The Koster aborigines were also those of Elsah. That is, our environs contained the same prehistoric cultural remains that are so spectacularly present at the Koster farm. The Koster Indians almost undoubtedly passed Elsah during trading journeys. Thus *Koster* gives us the most insightful popular investigation into the prehistory of our area that we yet have, and does this in a charming and personable way understandable to the average reader.

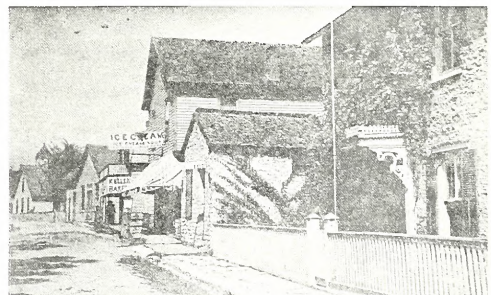
Paul O. Williams

## CALL FOR ELSAH PHOTOGRAPHS

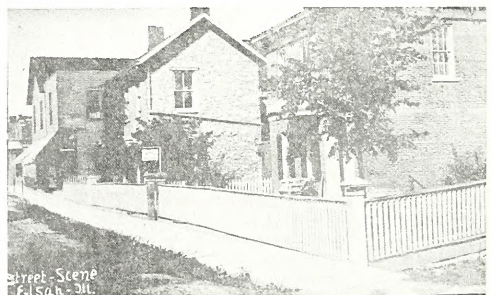
During the past fourteen years a large number of early photographs of Elsah scenes and people have come to light. These pictures have been indispensable in research on the history of the village and its architecture. Paul O. Williams has gathered an exceptionally large store of negatives of these photographs, and he is willing to copy new pictures that come to light in family collections. If you should happen to have any views of the Elsah area, please contact the editor, Charles Hosmer (P.O. Box 155, Elsah, IL 62028) or Paul O. Williams.

From time to time it seems appropriate to include some of these discoveries in the newsletter. This year Historic Elsah Foundation has been studying the evolution of the commercial building that houses the Elsah Landing Restaurant, partly with the intention of looking into exterior paint treatment and partly to study the possibility of awnings for the sidewalk facade. In this process Mrs. Jeannette Schuh of the Elsah Emporium made two post cards available to us from her collection. These pictures, postmarked 1907 and 1909 respectively, represent comparative treatments of one architectural theme. The older picture shows the left half of the commercial building with a small stone ice house in the foreground. The later view reveals that the ice house was torn down to make way for a frame addition. Both pictures are very clear, so enlargements have made it possible for us to study interesting details on the Belote and Bradley houses as well. Our members can make a real contribution to the study of Elsah history by loaning us additional views of the town and its people.

Thanks to Dr. George Dean for his generous contribution to HEF in memory of his wife. HEF plans to use the money to erect a map for guiding visitors to be placed near the Village Hall.



The business block on La Salle Street before 1907



The business block on La Salle Street before 1909